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Bush: Out Front and at Ease

"I know what I have to do to get from here to there," Vice President George Bush told a visitor the other day. That comment on his campaign to win the Republican nomination in 1988 reflects a man easy in his skin. So easy, indeed, as to raise doubt about the gnawing passion usually required to win the presidency.

Inner calm radiates from Bush. He has lost the anguished look. His voice holds steady, without the flights into the tenor range that once telegraphed stress. He doesn't quickly take offense. He volunteers that on a day God made for playing tennis, he tries to lighten the workload. He seems, if you'll pardon the expression, happy.

Hewing loyally to the Reagan line is, of course, the main thing Bush has to do these days. He does it with good grace and no sense of being burdened with a thankless task. He declines invitations to take sides in the inner wars of the administration on arms control. Of the controversial Strategic Defense Initiative, or Star Wars program, he says only: "I'm confident it won't disrupt Big Two relations."

On abortion, Bush says he changed from free choice on learning there had been 15 million abortions since the Supreme Court gave the operation legal sanction. Asked whether he thought 15 million Americans committed crimes, Bush said the number was less when abortion was illegal.

On budget matters he admits a majority in Congress probably favors a tax rise. But he prefers not to go that way "until the last nickel can be squeezed out on the spending side." When asked about a revenue rise dedicated to debt retirement and thus not eligible for application to spending programs, he says: "It's something I want to think about."

On one vexed piece of business, where Bush has special experience, he does go out front. He served as director of Central Intelligence, and worries about leaks. He thinks the breach of secrecy on the CIA plan for harassing Muammar Qaddafi, the Libyan blowhard, had a "devastating" impact. He says there has been too

much loose talk in Congress, at the CIA itself, and in the White House.

As a partial remedy Bush favors folding the separate Senate and House oversight committees into a Joint Committee on Intelligence. That way the staff would be drastically reduced. Instead of rotating on and off the committees as at present, members of the joint committee would serve long enough to acquire genuine expertise.

In another sensitive area, Bush may break new ground. He chairs a task force looking into international terrorism. Among other things Bush envisions a session with newspaper and television executives. He intends to sound them out on the possibilities for a self-imposed code of restraint on coverage of terrorist acts. But his staff makes certain there is no hint of advocating censorship—a little touch of front-runneritis.

Bush knows he leads the pack in the Republican race. When asked whether he wasn't especially strong in the West, he responded: "And in the East, and the South, and the North." The midterm elections, moreover, provide an occasion to lengthen the lead. The vice president plans an active campaign for fellow Republicans in the Senate, House and gubernatorial races. He is not about to undo his advantage by taking controversial stands or alienating other Republicans.

As rivals for the nomination he lists Jack Kemp, the New York congressman; Bob Dole, the Senate majority leader; Howard Baker, the former majority leader; and Pete DuPont, the former governor of Delaware. He sees as outsiders, trying to get started, former secretary of state Alexander Haig, and former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Toward all, he follows what President Reagan has called the 11th Commandment: Thou shalt not speak evil of any other Republican. Those who foresee an eventual Bush-Kemp ticket can take comfort from the vice president's stance. Of Kemp's campaign, he says: "I can't think of anything he's said that's personally derogatory."

Even right-wing support, which he

used to seek with a frenzy some found demeaning, no longer troubles Bush. He feels he stands well with many of what are known in the Republican Party as "the wingers." A striking case is the support the vice president enjoys from the evangelist Jerry Falwell. Of the others the vice president says: "There are some I can't do anything about."

That almost fatalistic attitude raises the matter of the gnawing passions. People don't become president by chance. They have to want the job intensely. They think about nothing else, night and day, in season and out, for years. Bush is not that way, at least not now.

"If I decide to go all out for the job . . ." he began at one point. Eyebrows were raised and a question put about whether the conditional approach didn't reflect a want of appetite. Bush had an answer. Many people, he said, felt that when it came to running for 1988, it was "still too early." But if you really and truly want to be president, is it ever too early?

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